

New Mexico Quarterly

Volume 35 | Issue 2

Article 16

1965

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Recommended Citation

Robb, John Donald. "The Function of the Contemporary Artist and Composer." *New Mexico Quarterly* 35, 2 (1965).
<https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol35/iss2/16>

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John Donald Robb

THE FUNCTION OF THE
CONTEMPORARY ARTIST
AND COMPOSER

THE MAN OR WOMAN who dedicates his or her life to the composition of music or to painting, faces a lifetime of grueling work with few of the daily satisfactions which come to other men. The arts, for the creative person, do not as a rule provide even a decent living. The most successful artist cannot hope to achieve the worldly success of the leaders in politics, business or the professions. Many of the world's greatest benefactors in the field of music have died in utter poverty and discouragement. And yet year after year some of the world's best minds and hearts are devoted to the problem of advancing the progress of art.

It is obvious that there must be a motive for this dedication—a motive shared by creative minds in all the fields of art. In this sense all artists are brothers and are united in a common loyalty. They face essentially the same problems. If we would understand contemporary art, we must understand the creative artist of today whose heart and brain pour forth the works which constitute the stream of art.

Music and the other arts, together with religion and science—and in fact all of mankind's activities—are motivated by what has been called “a truly monstrous assumption of the vast importance of mankind in the universal scheme.” Physically this assumption is indefensible. When man contemplates the vastness of space which is measured in light years, he seems a puny fact indeed. When he contemplates the span of a mortal life or even of the life of the race and compares it with the vastness of geologic time, it is easy to conclude that man does not matter, that there is no need for heroic efforts on his part. Yet mankind is conscious of something within itself for which can be found no comparison in nature except in the great cosmic plan itself. The surmise naturally arises that there must be a cause for the effect and there could not be such a vast plan without

a great planner. And since man is able with his mind to comprehend ever-increasing ramifications of the cosmic plan, and to feel the intense excitement which comes with his increasing mastery of the knowledge of that plan, he naturally feels that he is related to the planner. Hence the history of human thought is the story of man's effort to identify himself with that great cosmic ultimate, which the faithful call God, but of which believer and unbeliever alike are conscious.

The religious belief in eternal life is in part an attempt by mankind to reconcile the short span of life and the vastness of time. Science attempts to overcome the disparity between man's tiny physical powers and the awe-inspiring forces of the cosmos. Art attempts to match the beauty of man's perceptions and emotions with the almost incredible beauties of the creation.

It is a heroic struggle—the pigmy against the giant. Yet it goes on unceasingly and, though the individual members of the race fall and eventually pass into oblivion, the race holds the ground taken by the fallen and other individuals press on to establish new beachheads in the future.

The ground won and held in this onward struggle of the race insofar as the arts are concerned may be called tradition. Tradition in this sense is incomparably greater than the efforts of any individual, however great. This should, however, not detract from our admiration and appreciation of the individuals who have contributed to tradition. It seems to be the custom of human beings to refuse recognition to great men who live too close to them in time or space. We accord recognition to great men only gradually and, following the lead of generous souls like Felix Mendelssohn who wrote, after hearing some lesser men criticize Mozart, "If, in the course of my life, I never achieve anything else, I am at all events determined to be unutterably rude to all those who show no reverence for their masters" And despite their achievements and mankind's ultimate verdict on contemporary composers, we owe it to them to recognize that they are the valiant in the vanguard of musical civilization—who are staking their own lives in the attempt to advance the musical tradition of the race. And there is consolation even for those composers who may not win the laurel wreaths of greatness in the realization that their efforts have contributed to the work of greater men who themselves are only a part of the tradition of the race.

IN EVERY INTELLIGENT HUMAN EFFORT there is an end and a means. For every musical composition this means that there is an idea to be expressed and a technique to be employed for that purpose. However, it will appear that the ideology of a composer is sometimes unexpressed or only vaguely expressed in words—for of course composers express themselves primarily in their compositions, whereas the technique employed is generally much more tangibly in evidence.

Since I have been challenged by my former students for stressing technique and since many people wince at the very word, I shall quote from a most lucid explanation of the importance of technique. I refer to an article by Rhys Carpenter entitled "The Basis of Artistic Creation in the Fine Arts," one of three essays published by the Rutgers University Press in 1942 under the title *The Bases of Artistic Creation*. While this essay deals with the graphic arts rather than music, it seems to me equally applicable to the art of musical composition.

Mr. Carpenter says (and in quoting I shall skip freely but attempt to avoid any distortion of meaning): ". . . the artist's confidence in his own unlimited power to create is fallacious. . . . For otherwise, how is it that to the trained beholder every painting is not merely its maker, but also its date and its environment? . . . Let us recognize that there is something which guides and shapes the destinies of artistic expression through the centuries, something neither wilful nor chaotic, but ordered, measured and inexorable. This something shows itself most clearly as technical evolution. . . . The popular notion of genius, surviving probably from the Romantic movement, as an effortless and God-given illumination . . . has corrupted our understanding of the artist's real nature and encouraged all manner of outrage from sheer laziness to sheer impudence. . . . Art which does not have its source in emotion and does not find its end in a corresponding emotion in the beholder is mere academicism. True; but *mere intensity of feeling never produced a work of art* . . . every artist must feel deeply. . . . Yet it is not because he feels deeply that he can create deeply."

It is no doubt true that the general public is more interested in the results of artistic endeavor than in the means by which these results were achieved. But this is true also of science. Yet no one would criticize the scientist for his interest in experiment and technique, nor the position of the scientist who maintains that knowledge for its own sake is a sufficient goal for the scientist. The public has long since

learned that the most abstract and seemingly useless investigations in science have sometimes produced, in the long run, the most far-reaching practical results. This is the old question of applied science versus pure science. The victories of the applied science arouse almost immediate and widespread public interest. The victories of pure science are often of interest only to scientists, college professors and students of science. Relatively few people were interested in or understood the earth-shaking importance of the mathematical formula $m=E/c^2$ announced by Albert Einstein in 1904. But the world was electrified by the news in the closing days of World War II that practical scientists, working from that formula, had discovered how to split the atom and unlock its awesome energy in the form of the atomic bomb. The time lag in this case between the thought and its realization was only about forty years. In the case of some scientific discoveries, the time lag has been centuries.

There is a similar time lag in the world of music between the thought of the experimenter and its realization in great compositions advancing the art of music. We who wish to understand the development of music in our century cannot afford to neglect the technical experiments which have been going on in our time, for out of them will be developed the music of the future.

THE CURRENT SITUATION in the field of art, to my mind, is analogous to the situation in the field of music.

It has been said that with the beginning of the twentieth century, a six hundred year period, during which the painter had but one problem, ended. That problem was how to represent in opaque paint on a two-dimensional surface, the three-dimensional world of transparent light.

The student of musical history of the western world knows that, for a similar period of time, the composer has had a similar problem, to express the world of man's thought and feeling within boundaries of a musical system which consists of a set of diatonic seven-note scales (with five auxiliary tones in each scale) of which one tone is the center, and of which all others should be merely satellites. This is the system of tonality.

These problems have been solved, it is said, and with their solution, a period ends, or, to use a better word, dissolves.

It has been said that the three signs of the dissolution of our period

are classicism, archaicism, and universal eclecticism—the imitation respectively of the classical masters, the primitive artists, and a general borrowing from anywhere and everywhere.

Of both the graphic arts and music, I think it is safe to say that the end of the nineteenth century brought the end of a period. In both fields, the technical problems had been solved at least to such an extent that the law of diminishing returns had set in. It had become increasingly difficult to paint a picture or write a piece of music which would not seem to be a rehash of something which everyone knew had already been created—during the nineteenth century. The resemblances were so easily apparent that it became a favorite sport to point them out. So we have had our tune detectives. Naturally the composers who dislike being ridiculed or criticized in this manner reacted against the nineteenth century.

Some, like Schönberg, apparently broke entirely with the past (though he denied this). Others turned to less obvious models than the nineteenth-century masters—to the primitive artists, or to other miscellaneous sources such as Oriental art. These are the four tendencies which we may somewhat pedantically classify as experimentation, neoclassicism, primitivism, and eclecticism.

The first of these was condemned as arid; the others were condemned as imitative. Hence the past half-century has been a painful period for the creative artist.

It appears that the only true course for the creative artist is ahead. And the way ahead, whether we like it or not, is represented by what Mr. Carpenter calls “the weirdly heterogenous phenomena of ultra-modern art.” The creative artists of today have been forced to attempt the creation of a new style or tradition and that attempt is represented in all the experiments of the past fifty years. We must therefore examine that experimentation, virtually all of which, no matter how wild it may seem, is destined to influence the future of music. It is not, of course, to be studied as in a laboratory—in its pure form. Most of the compositions of today represent a mixture of experiment with tried and true elements derived from the past. Somehow, out of this mixture of experimentation with enlarged tonality, polytonality, atonality, nineteenth-century romanticism, neoclassicism, primitivism, exoticism, and general eclecticism, our composers are evolving works exhibiting greatness and novelty. A new style and a new tradition are in the making.

IT WOULD NOT PAY to conclude that the mass of mankind has been entirely convinced. The movement which I have described has been "a palace revolution" led by composers and conductors and acquiesced to by the critics. The public still loves the romantic music of the last century. Slowly, grudgingly, it has commenced to feel and concede also the excitement of the new ideas.

Of course the time lag in public acceptance of new ideas is not peculiar to the world of music. I have mentioned Mr. Einstein's equation. The English historian Lecky has pointed out that the same is true in the field of politics. He concluded that it takes about twenty-five years to arouse the public to an awareness of social injustice sufficiently to cause remedial legislation to be enacted.


One of the reasons for this time lag is the great numbers of people involved and the time and expense required to disseminate information to them—particularly when there is no vested interest equipped with the funds and facilities to push the process of public education.

In the field of music a very concrete reason is apparent. Music can not fully be grasped by a casual hearing. However the music publishers will not lay out their money, especially for the publication of large works, until the public demand has been created. The composer perforce must wait until some famous conductor or artist takes him up and popularizes his music and, perhaps even more important, his name.

The scores (and what is even more important to the layman, recordings) of many new works are now becoming available.

Little by little the contemptuous intolerance of the layman toward these contemporary developments must necessarily give way to an appreciation of what is truly good in them. The concept that the last of the geniuses died at the stroke of midnight which ended the last century is fallacious.

Great geniuses are at work among us. To discover them should be one of the exciting adventures of mankind during the next fifty year.

 JOHN DONALD ROBB, UNM Professor Emeritus of Music, is known as a composer, a conductor and the author of a large number of books and articles in the fields of music and law. A graduate of Harvard Law School, Mr. Robb practiced law in New York from 1922 to 1941. After a time as head of the music department, he became dean of the College of Fine Arts at UNM, a position he held for eleven years. He has composed over sixty-five musical works, many for orchestra.